

Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, August 3, 1797, from The Works of Thomas Jefferson in Twelve Volumes. Federal Edition. Collected and Edited by Paul Leicester Ford.

TO JAMES MADISON MAD. MSS.

Monticello, Aug 3, 97.

I scribbled you a line on the 24th ult; it missed of the post, and so went by a private hand. I perceive from yours by mr. Bringham, that you had not received it. In fact, it was only on earnest exhortation to come here with Monroe, which I still hope you will do. In the meantime, I enclose you a letter from him, and wish your opinion on its principal subject. The variety of other topics the day I was with you, kept out of sight the letter to Mazzei imputed to me in the papers, the general substance of which is mine, tho' the diction has been considerably varied in the course of it's translations from English into Italian, from Italian into French, & from French into English. I first met with it at Bladensburg, and for a moment conceived I must take the field of the public papers. I could not disavow it wholly, because the greatest part was mine, in substance tho' not in form. I could not avow it as it stood, because the form was not mine, and, in one place, the substance very materially falsified. This, then, would render explanations necessary; nay, it would render proofs of the whole necessary, & draw me at length into a publication of all (even the secret) transactions of the administration while I was of it; and embroil me personally with every member of the Executive, with the Judiciary, and with others still. I soon decided in my own mind, to be entirely silent. I consulted with several friends at Philadelphia, who, every one of them, were clearly against my avowing or disavowing, & some of them conjured me most earnestly to let nothing provoke me to it. I corrected, in conversation with them, a

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substantial misrepresentation in the copy published. The original has a sentiment *like* this (for I have it not before me), “they are endeavoring to submit us to the substance, as they already have to the *forms* of the British government;” meaning by *forms*, the birth-days,

levees, processions to parliament, inauguration pomposities, &c. But the copy published says, “as they have already submitted us to the *form* of the British,” &c., making me express hostility to the form of our government, that is to say, to the constitution itself. For this is really the difference of the word *form*, used in the singular or plural, in that phrase, in the English language. Now it would be impossible for me to explain this publicly, without bringing on a personal difference between Genl Washington & myself, which nothing before the publication of this letter has ever done. It would embroil me also with all those with whom his character is still popular, that is to say, nine tenths of the people of the U S; and what good would be obtained by my avowing the letter with the necessary explanations? Very little indeed, in my opinion, to counterbalance a good deal of harm. From my silence in this instance, it can never be inferred that I am afraid to own the general sentiments of the letter. If I am subject to either imputation, it is to that of avowing such sentiments too frankly both in private & public, often when there is no necessity for it, merely because I disdain everything like duplicity. Still, however, I am open to conviction. Think for me on the occasion, and advise me what to do, and confer with Colo Monroe on the subject.

Let me entreat you again to come with him; there are other important things to consult on. One will be his affair. Another is the subject of the petition now enclosed you, to be proposed to our district, on the late presentment of our representative by the grand jury: the idea it brings forward is still confined to my own breast. It has never been mentioned to any mortal, because I first wish your opinion on the expediency of the measure. If you approve it, I shall propose to P. Carr or some other, to father it, and to present it to the counties at their general muster. This will be in time for our Assembly. The presentment going in the public papers just at the moment when Congress was together, produced

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a great effect both on it's friends & foes in that body, very much to the disheartening & mortification of the latter. I wish this petition, if approved, to arrive there under the same circumstance, to produce the counter-effect so wanting for their gratification. I could have wished to receive it from you again at our court on Monday, because P. Carr & Wilson Nicholas will be there, and might also be consulted, and commence measures for putting it into motion. If you can return it then, with your opinion and corrections, it will be of importance. Present me affectionately to mrs. Madison, & convey to her my entreaties to interpose her good offices & persuasives with you to bring her here, and before we uncover our house, which will yet be some weeks.

Salutations & Adieu.